

Holy Mission:
The “Entire Sanctification” of the Triune God’s Creation
A Response to the Paper

It is a privilege, albeit one accorded to me at the last moment, to respond to the paper of my friends Phil Hamner and Andy Johnson. My primary response is one of affirmation and appreciation. However, I must confess that it took me a while to follow some of the initial steps they made rather quickly at the beginning of their paper. Assuming they lacked time and space I would like to offer a few observations that help me make this journey with them.

Phil and Andy begin by affirming that how a church conceives of eschatology usually correlates with how it understands its mission. While that may not be true in a highly individualistic way of thinking about eschatology it is certainly true from a biblical perspective. And certainly with Jesus the link between eschatology and mission is the Kingdom of God. At least within the Jewish framework in which Jesus lived and communicated the Kingdom of God was an eschatological concept. The very phrase, Kingdom or Reign of God, described the coming age, the Messianic age that would break into this present evil age shortly before the end. The great discussion in the 20th century over whether Jesus conceived of the Kingdom as already or yet to come concluded that both were true. The kingdom both began to bring the present evil age to its close and inaugurated the eternal reign of God. The New Testament as a whole embraces this truth as can be seen by Paul’s comment, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:11 where he declared that the Old Testament events to which he had referred in the preceding verses were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. The Kingdom of God is an eschatological concept.

But just as surely, the Kingdom of God is an expression of mission. As Matthew 4:12-22 describes it Jesus left his homeland of Nazareth and moved to Galilee of the Gentiles, established his new home in Capernaum and began to proclaim that the kingdom has come near. The evidence of the arriving of the kingdom was the calling of Peter and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee into kingdom discipleship. And the very next

paragraph describes Jesus' ministry as a ministry of teaching, proclaiming the good news, and healing. In Matthew 10 Jesus sent the twelve out to proclaim the good news of the arrival of the kingdom.

The first verse that many of us learned was, "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not die but have the life of the age." (John 3:16) What we have always heard translated "eternal life" is, in fact, the life of the age. What age? The coming age, the kingdom age, the age that was breaking into time from eternity in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom connects eschatology and mission.

The kingdom also helps us understand how the individualistic eschatology of our Articles 15 and 16 connect to the transformation and restoration of all creation so passionately described by Phil and Andy. As they point out, if our eschatology is purely individualistic then our mission is the saving of "souls from being eternally punished for their individual sinful acts." While this truth was moving and persuasive in modernity its power to persuade and move is declining. That loss of power is not so much because the emphasis on saving souls (persons – not disembodied ghosts) is wrong – I don't think it is – but because it is partial and can only be fully true in the larger picture of the transformation and restoration of all creation. At this point developments in mission theology that have become clear in the past 20 years can be helpful to us.

The mission vision of most of us was shaped by an ecclesiocentric vision of mission in which we were called to be a missionary church, sending missions and missionaries from our bastion of Christianity to a pagan world far enough away that we had to travel by boat or by air to get there. In recent years missiologists have turned from an ecclesiocentric view of missions to a theocentric view of mission. Rather than being a missionary church we serve a missionary God. The term now prevalent in mission theology is the *mission dei*, the mission of God. As Darrell Guder states, "We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation."¹ That is to say that mission is rooted in the very nature of God. As Dr. McCormick's paper of last night

reminded us this means that mission must be understood in the light of the Trinity. God, the first (in several senses of the word) missionary sends the Son, through the power of the Spirit, to the world. The Spirit gathers up the world for the Son to present to the Father. Several implications follow. First, for us mission is participating in the mission of God. As David Bosch declared, “Our mission has no life of its own: only in the hands of the sending God can it truly be called mission.”² This does not diminish our mission; it does not diminish our responsibility in mission; it only increases both the blessing and the responsibility of mission.

A second implication is that mission is never imperialistic or triumphalistic, imposing by the power of God either our culture, or even God’s culture, on some inferior being. It is the incarnate and crucified Christ whom God the Father sent. The power of the Spirit into which Jesus was baptized did not stop the beatings at his arrest nor prevent the sufferings of the cross. Despite Eckhard Schnabel’s recent protest there is a profound sense in which mission is incarnational.³ As was the case with God in Christ, for us mission does not occur unless we embrace a certain scandal of particularity and enter a place that is different from our place of ease and comfort and identify with those who live under the domination of the powers of sin, injustice, addictions, and any other kind of evil. The work of mission is the work of being a servant, a suffering servant to those in need whom you can name.

A third important implication is that the church does have a most significant role to play in the *missio dei*. If, as we have affirmed, God sends the Son, through the power of the Spirit, or if God sends the Son and the Spirit, to the world, the church is an instrument of that mission. The church exists because of the mission of God. “There is church because there is mission, not vice versa.” Further, “to participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.”⁴

Not only is the church an instrument of mission the book with which the church’s very life is so intricately intertwined is a missionary book. In his recently released New Testament Theology, I. Howard Marshall describes the writings of the New Testament as

the documents of a mission. He writes, “The subject matter is not, as it were, Jesus in himself or God in himself, but Jesus in his role as Savior and Lord. New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology. By this I mean that the documents came into being as the result of a two-act mission, first, the mission of Jesus sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings that it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Savior, and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows.”⁵

All this serves to convince me that Andy and Phil are quite right to observe that the way a church understands eschatology correlates with its understanding of mission. But what of their emphasis on the transformation and restoration of all creation? I think it should be sufficient to return to John 3:16. “God so loved *the world* that he sent his only son.” Then verse 17, “God did not send the Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The mission of God in sending the Son is a mission to the world, the *ko/smoj*. There are a variety of meanings that can attach to *ko/smoj*, but its fundamental meaning is the whole created order. However, John sometimes uses *ko/smoj* (the world) to mean humankind as systemically turned away from God. The world is not intrinsically evil, but “it has turned away from its creator and has become enslaved to evil powers,” as George Eldon Ladd has put it.⁶ This particularly Johannine use of the world is very consistent with Phil and Andy’s depiction of the social and economic structures that addict and destroy people today.

Further, the word “saved” in verse 17 (*s@%/zw*)), dealt with far more than “saving souls from being eternally punished for their individual sinful acts.” You could quite properly translate John 3:17, “God did not send the Son into the created order and the evil structures of society to condemn, but in order that the whole created order and the structures of society might be delivered through him.” The *missio dei* clearly envisions the transformation and restoration of the whole created order and end of evil social and economic structures. The scope of salvation described in John 3:17 could indeed be

described as the “entire sanctification” of the whole created order. That is God’s mission and by grace he has granted to the church the privilege of sharing in that mission.

Our holy mission is to participate in the mission of God and God has promised a marvelous outcome for that mission. Our future and our mission will finally be fully joined together. The restoration and transformation of all creation will bring our ransomed souls at last to worship throughout the never-ending age at the feet of God and the Lamb. In that glorious day – eternal day – we will not worry about our individual souls. We will rejoice in being a part of the people redeemed from every nation. In fact, we will sing a new song to the Lamb, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priest serving our God, and they will reign on earth.” (Rev. 5:9-10).

- Roger L. Hahn

¹ Darrell L. Guder, “Missional Church: From Sending to Being Sent,” in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. The Gospel and Our Culture Series. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998, p. 4.

² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 390.

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*. Vol. 2, *Paul and the Early Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InteVarsity Press, 2004, pp. 1574-1575.

⁴ Bosch, p. 390.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall. *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, pp. 34-35.

⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*. Revised Edition. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p. 262.